

Taming the Worry Monster

Anxiety in Gifted and Twice-Exceptional (2e) Youth

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Premise of our discussion

Anxiety is a “monster” that can be overcome and/or managed by demystifying its power through understanding the way it works, outsmarting it, and thus, rendering it powerless.

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Famous Example

The Wizard of Oz

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What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is an
Irrational Fear

However, our brain tricks us to thinking the fear is rational because it is based on a rational premise (“The plane could crash and I will die”).

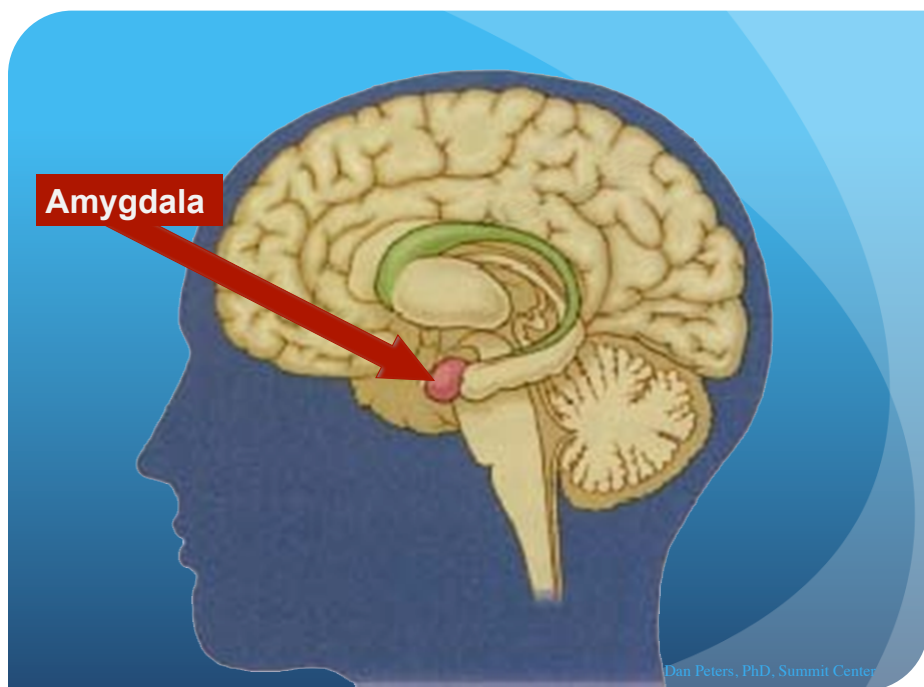
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What is Fear?

- Fear is a normal and useful emotion.
- Adrenalin is produced in a small gland on top of our kidneys, called adrenal glands.
- Nature devised a “fight or flight” response to allow us to survive a life or death situation.

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Amygdala



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What is Fear? - continued (2)

- **DANGER!** - The amygdala sends messages to our adrenal glands to squirt a large dose of adrenalin in our blood stream.
- Adrenalin increases the heart and breathing rate, increases the strengths of muscles, and diverts blood from the brain and stomach into the muscles.
- We are immediately converted into super-powerful beings, capable of super-human feats.
- However, this is not helpful when we need to deliver a speech. Why?

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Why does our body feel this way? (1)

- Heart and lungs - beats faster, chest gets tight, you breathe faster and can't get enough air.

Reason:

To fight better, the body speeds up the heart and lungs and sends more blood into the muscles so they are stronger.

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Why does our body feel this way? (2)

- Stomach - stomach pain, nausea, diarrhea.

Reason:

All the blood goes out of your stomach and intestines and goes into the heart, lungs and muscles to make you a fighting machine.

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Why does our body feel this way? (3)

- Brain - dizzy, lightheaded, strange feelings fainting, going crazy, losing control.

Reason:

Blood goes from the brain into the heart, lungs, and muscles.

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Why does our body feel this way? (4)

- Arms and legs - sweating, cold hands, numbness, shaking, trembling, muscle tenseness and pain.

Reason:

Blood goes out of the skin so you won't bleed as much if you get hurt which explains all those funny nerve symptoms.

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Why is Extra Adrenalin Secreted?

- Scary thoughts and beliefs trigger our amygdala and cause the release of adrenalin.
- When we scare our brain, it causes the release of adrenalin from our adrenal glands.
- Multiple scary thoughts release multiple doses of adrenalin ("I am going to fail the test, my parents will be mad, I am going to get grounded forever, everyone will think I am stupid, and I will never get into a good college!")

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Types of Anxiety

Panic Attack

A severe fear response caused by repeated and large outpourings of adrenalin, due to perceived threat, and resulting with several physical symptoms.

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Types of Anxiety

Agoraphobia

Anxiety about being in places or situations from which escape might be difficult (or embarrassing) or in which help may not be available in the event of having an unexpected or situationally predisposed panic attack.

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Types of Anxiety

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

An anxiety producing, often persistent thought or idea, that is intrusive and embarrassing. A compulsion is a repetitive, intentional behavior that is done to relieve the anxiety produced by the thought.

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Types of Anxiety

Specific Phobia

A restrictive fear that is excessive and unreasonable, and triggered by the presence or anticipation of a specific object (snakes) or situation (public speaking).

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Types of Anxiety

Social Phobia

A persistent fear of social or performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny of others.

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Types of Anxiety

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Exposure to a traumatic event where the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with events that were life-threatening or serious injury, and the person's response was intense fear, helplessness, or horror. The event is then re-experienced.

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Types of Anxiety

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Excessive and persistent anxiety and worry.

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Types of Anxiety

Separation Anxiety Disorder

Difficulty leaving parents.

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Types of Anxiety

Perfectionism

“Fear of Failure”; a constant state of anxiety about making errors. Extremely high standards and perceive excessive expectations and negative criticisms from others.

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Types of Anxiety

Eating Disorders

Eating Disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, include extreme emotions, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding food and weight issues; includes an **“intense fear”** of weight gain or feeling fat.

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Common Characteristics of Gifted Youth

- Rapid learners, strong memory, large vocabulary, **advanced comprehension of nuances**, largely self-taught, **unusual emotional depth, abstract/complex/ logical/ insightful thinking, idealism and sense of justice, intense feelings and reactions, highly sensitive**, long attention span and persistence...

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Common Characteristics of Gifted Youth, cont.

- **Preoccupied with own thoughts**, impatient with self and others' inabilities and slowness, **asks probing questions** (able to go beyond what is taught), wide range of interests, **highly developed curiosity**, interest in experimenting and doing things differently, **divergent thinking (putting things together in different or unusual ways)**, keen and unusual sense of humor.

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Overexcitabilities (OEs)

- Kazimierz Dabrowski explained the sensitivity and intensity experienced by many gifted individuals in terms of overexcitabilities—a greater capacity to be stimulated by and respond to external and internal stimuli. Overexcitability permeates a gifted person's existence... and gives energy to their intelligence, talents and personality.

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Types of Overexcitabilities

- **Psychomotor** - movement, strong drive, energy, extended bouts of activity
- **Intellectual** - insatiable curiosity, voracious appetite and capacity for intellectual effort and stimulation; mental activity is intensified and accelerated.
- **Sensual** - heightened experiences of seeing, smelling, tasting, touching and hearing.
- **Imaginational** - active imaginary and fantasy life
- **Emotional** - capacity for emotional depth, empathy, deeply feels own and others emotions

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Characteristics of 2e Youth

- 2e (twice-exceptional) youth are both gifted and have a learning or emotional disability/difference/challenge
- Therefore, 2e youth have many of the aforementioned characteristics, in addition to the following...

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Types of 2e Exceptionalities

- **Aspergers Disorder** - a deficit in engaging in a reciprocal relationship; inability or difficulty noticing and understanding social nuances
- **Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)** developmentally inappropriate levels of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity (executive functioning deficits)

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More Types of 2e Exceptionalities

- **Dyslexia** - difficulty learning and processing language, despite adequate intelligence, instruction, and motivation
- **Dysgraphia** - deficit in fine-motor functioning which affects writing.
- **Sensory Integration Disorder (SID)** - difficulty with different sensory systems and motor systems working together (difficulty with muscle control, difficulty regulating sensory input-light, sound).

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2e Challenges

- Writing, taking tests, showing academic competence and mastery, public speaking, reading, tying shoes, completing schoolwork, turning in schoolwork, meeting new people, socially appropriate behavior, participating in sports, standing up for themselves, attempting new activities, riding a bike, driving a car, getting a job, and/or going to college.

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What Does Anxiety Look Like?

Physical

Headaches, stomachaches, backaches
difficulty relaxing, low energy, difficulty
sleeping, nightmares, loss of appetite, vomiting.

Behavioral

Avoidance, crying, meltdowns, oppositional
behavior, disruptive behavior, withdrawal, social
isolation, nail biting, clinging, excessive
concern about competence, excessive need for
reassurance, significant behavior change.

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Cognitive Model of Anxiety (1)

- Our thoughts determine our emotions and hence, our behavior.
- Our anxious thoughts are always lies, exaggerations, and catastrophic.

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Cognitive Model of Anxiety (2)

1. **Distressing thought** - “I am going to fail”, “My mom is going to leave me,” “What if they laugh at me,” “There will never be peace on Earth.”
2. **Amygdala** activates causing surge of adrenalin - physiological symptoms - increased heart rate, sweaty, weak muscles, trouble swallowing.
3. **Behavioral response** - avoidance, emotional meltdown, disruptive behavior.

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Slay the Worry Monster!

- **Avoiding** the feared stimulus, situation, or feeling reinforces the fear and **makes it stronger**.
- The fear **must be faced** and conquered in order to reduce it's power.
- We must use our thinking brain (frontal cortex) to over-ride our primitive brain (amygdala).

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Cognitive Interventions (1)

- **Identify the thought** - “What am I thinking about?”
- **Challenge the thought** - “Is it true that I always fail?”
- **Modify the thought** - “The test is going to be hard, but I am prepared.”
- **Replace the thought** - “I am going to do fine.”

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Cognitive Interventions (2)

- **Positive Self-Talk**

Famous Example:

The Little Engine That Could

“I think I can, I think I can, I think I can...”

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Mindfulness-based Strategies

- Notice anxious thoughts, but do not believe them - let them pass.
- Stay present - living in the future (the unknown) produces anxiety.
- Breathe.

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Behavioral Interventions

Practice, Practice, Practice...

Systematic Desensitization

(Baby Steps)

Overcome by doing, one step at a time.

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Behavioral Interventions

Practice, Practice, Practice...

Fake it to make it

Do the activity and pretend you like it.

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Behavioral Interventions

Practice, Practice, Practice...

Pleasure Predicting

Before you do an activity, predict on a scale of 1 to 10 how much fun you will have.

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Behavioral Interventions

Practice, Practice, Practice...

Deep Breathing

Teach inhaling on a 6 count and exhaling on a 6 count.

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Behavioral Interventions

Practice, Practice, Practice...

Behavioral Rehearsal

Do the feared thing over and over and over again until it isn't scary.

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Behavioral Interventions

Practice, Practice, Practice...

Take a Risk

Help a child try something new,
give permission to not do it well.

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Behavioral Interventions

Practice, Practice, Practice...

Prescribed Failure

Help a perfectionist fail.

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Summary (1)

1. Anxiety is **NOT** powerful when it is understood.
2. Remember how the brain works. Scary thoughts activate the amygdala which sends for too much adrenalin.
3. Remember the power of thoughts - they are responsible for our feelings and behavior. We must use our thinking brain (frontal cortex) to over-power our primitive fear brain (amygdala).

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Summary (2)

4. Learn strategies for identifying thoughts, and modifying them or replacing them with more adaptive ones.
5. Set up behavioral rehearsals or practice to become competent in area of fear and worry.
6. Always remember, anxiety is a monster that is trying to trick you, keep you from maximizing your abilities, from enjoying what life has to offer, and being happy.

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Thank you



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Suggested Readings

Children

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